

RED

was the main man, a beat-up and weathered middle-aged white guy in a torn suit jacket and ragged pants. He was on the lam for some reason, had seen it all and knew everything. The other two of his team were Frenchy, a younger guy with a terrible sunburn, who, like us, had just come to town, he apparently riding on a freight, and the Skipper, who wore a peaked ship's officer's cap, and who, it was clear, by their silent communications, had been a partner of Red for a good while.

Red opened up the bottle, which had a screw cap, then solemnly poured a tiny drop of wine onto the sand.

"For the boys upstate" he said softly, then he took a sip himself. He looked at me.

"Well, Music Man, you're pretty good with that box. What are you gonna do with it?"

"He's a reggae singer" said Eric. "He's gonna be a star."

"Well if you want to make it in music" said Red, sitting there under the pier, making sure we were all paying attention, then taking another pull off the wine and looking straight at me. "Listen to me now, and I'll tell you the truth: you gotta have the music, you gotta have the looks, and you gotta have a gimmick. Like Elvis Presley, he could rock like a sonofabitch, the girls loved him, and he had a gimmick!"

"What was his gimmick?"

"What was his gimmick?! Jesus Christ, man! Pay attention!" said Red sharply, shaking his head at me. He took another chug, and passed the bottle.

by PETER CASE

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